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ABSTRACT

This study provides a data profile on Vermont's middle level schools and draws several comparisons between these data and those collected in a similar study conducted in 1980. Section One reports the current data from surveyed principals. Section Two offers several comparisons between 1980 and 1989 data. Section Three draws conclusions and offers recommendations. Data were collected by means of a 19-item questionnaire that was mailed to the 31 middle grades schools in Vermont. A total of 23 questionnaires were returned. Reported findings concern: (1) administrative organization, including grade configuration, housing arrangements, and articulation; (2) establishment of the middle school; (3) decisions concerning grade organization; (4) staff development; (5) curriculum, including common subjects, and required and elective programing; (6) instruction, including instructional organization and schedule, grouping for instruction, independent study, reports of pupil progress, and counseling of students; (7) school evaluation; and (8) other data, including home-based and teacher advisory programs, faculty preparation, plans for evaluation, and major problems. Comparisons in Section Two focus on basic curriculum and instruction. Conclusions reflect expectations for improving middle level education for Vermont's early adolescents. (RH)

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PROFILE OF VERMONT SCHOOLS IN THE MIDDLE

A RESEARCH REPORT

Michael G. Allen

VERMONT ASSOCIATION FOR MIDDLE LEVEL EDUCATION

DEDICATION

To a man whose professional deeds and
personal behavior match his words

Raymond J. Pentkowski
Superintendent of Schools
Addison-Rutland Supervisory Union
Fair Haven, Vermont

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FOREWORD

The dramatic growth in middle level schools nationwide has fostered a corresponding need for data with which to more carefully plan such organizational and curricular change. Coupled with the reinstitution of various middle level licensure categories in a myriad of states (Allen & McEwin, 198?) the proliferation of middle level buildings and programs demands a better integration of theory with practice.

We know that certain elements are considered "essential" to sound middle level education. Yet without a current "data profile" we are unable to ascertain the degree of "compliance" with such perspectives. How do Vermont's middle level schools measure up? To what extent do they exhibit those characteristics of sound middle level education considered so essential (This We Believe, 1982)? This study, coupled with a comparison of the 1980 data, and a number of conclusions and recommendations, offers readers an up-to-date data profile on organizational and instructional components of middle level education in the state.

MGA

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this study is twofold. First, provide a current data profile on Vermont's middle level schools; and, second, draw several comparisons between these data and those collected in a similar study conducted in 1980.

The study is divided into several sections. Section One reports the current data on Vermont's middle level schools as reported by principals in a questionnaire (Appendix A). Section Two offers several comparisons between data collected in this study and those in a similar stydy conducted in 1980. Finally, Section Three draws several conclusions based on the data collected and offers readers a series of recommendations concerning middle grades education in Vermont.

The Survey Instrument

A 19 item questionnaire (Appendix A) was mailed to the thirty-one middle grades schools throughout Vermont in September, 1989.

Identifying Vermont's Middle Level Schools

The schools listed in the Vermont Education Directory 1988-1989 that contained any combination of grades four or five through eight received a questionnaire. Utilizing this definition, thirty-one middle level schools were identified.

This definition is somewhat more inclusive than that employed in the 1980 study which included schools that "serv(ed) at least three grades, no more than five grades and including grades six and seven"(Allen, 1980). The principal reason for the change was to include the schools that contain

only grades seven and eight.

Data Collection and Analysis

The questionnaire was mailed to thirty-one middle level schools throughout Vermont. Twenty-three completed questionnaires were received which represents a 74% return. The data were transferred to tally sheets and collated and summarixed for presentation in both narrative and Table form.

SECTION ONE: FINDINGS

ADMINISTRATIVE ORGANIZATION

Data describing the administrative organization of Vermont's middle grades schools are reported in three categories--grade configuration, housing arrangements for students, and means employed of providing articulation between sending and receiving schools.

Grade Configuration

The single predominent grade arrangement in Vermont is 5-8 (Table 1). However, the combined total of middle level schools containing grades 6-8 and 7-8 is 11, one more than for 5-8. Two schools reporting contain grades 4-8. That there are only thirty-one middle grades schools in Vermont, reflects the fact that the vast majority of middle level students are housed in schools and programs not specifically or generally considered middle schools of middle level programing.

Housing Arrangements

Ninteen of the middle grades schools reporting house students in a single building which contains only the middle grades while four report that students are housed with others from both/either lower and higher grades. With approximately three hundred school buildings most of Vermont's early adolescents are housed in either K-6, K-8, or 7-12 schools. Economic and historical forces lie at the heart of these housing arrangements. Such forces remain at work and will probably prevent the formation of many more "middle schools"

TABLE ONE
Middle Level Schools by Grade Configuration

GRADE	4-8	5-8	6-8	7-8*	
TOTAL	2	10	5	6	= 23

* Two schools reporting are in a 7-12 setting.

in the state.

Articulation

A diverse set of strategies to provide articulation between middle grades schools and those with lower and higher grades are employed in Vermont (Table 2). The most frequently used articulation strategies include obtaining or providing data about students entering or leaving middle grades school, and visitation by students from feeder schools. Middle grades students also visit the high school they will attend for an orientation. Finally, several schools organize joint workshops between middle grades teachers and their counterparts in lower and higher grades. Information sharing about students academic performance and school-related attitudes and behavior seem to predominate the articulation process.

ESTABLISHING THE MIDDLE SCHOOL

As might be expected most schools reporting indicate that providing a program specifically designed for children of this age group was the primary reason for establishing their middle school. Eliminating crowded conditions in other school buildings was another important reason. To remedy the weakness of the junior high school was another important consideration (Table 3).

DECIDING GRADE ORGANIZATION

In the schools reporting three groups predominate in determining the grade organization (Table 4). Principals, teachers and system administrators appear to control the

TABLE TWO +
Articulation Strategies

STRATEGY *	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
TOTAL	19	17	14	9	17	21	20	21	10	12	12	5

*

1. Joint workshops with teachers in lower/higher grades.
2. Joint curriculum planning activities with teachers in lower/higher grades.
3. Middle school teacher visitation of elementary or high school.
4. Sharing faculty with elementary and/or high school.
5. Giving program information to elementary and/or high school.
6. Obtaining or providing data on students entering or leaving your school.
7. Student visitation of high school for orientation.
8. Visitation of your school from feeder schools.
9. Middle school students'visit to feeder schools to acquaint elementary students with your program and facilities.
10. Visitation of your school by high school representatives for the purpose of orientation.
11. Middle school students take advanced course work in the high school.
12. Other: Parent workshops; Band & Chorus visit feeder schools; high school course offerings and registration in middle grade school.

+
multiple responses

TABLE THREE +

Reasons for Establishing Middle Level Schools

REASONS *	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13
TOTALS	5	2	3	7	8	1	10	15	4	4	3	4	1

*

1. To remedy the weakness of the two level organization.
2. To move Grade 9 into the high school.
3. To provide more specialization in Grade 5 and/or 6.
4. To bridge better the elementary and the high school.
5. To remedy the weaknesses of the junior high school.
6. To aid desegregation.
7. To eliminate crowded conditions in other schools.
8. To provide a program specifically designed for children in this age group.
9. To utilize a new building.
10. To try out various innovations.
11. To use plans that have been successful in other school systems.
12. To utilize an older building when a new senior high school was built.
13. Other: separate older and younger students.

+

multiple responses

TABLE FOUR +
Persons Deciding Grade Organization

PERSONS DECIDING *	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
TOTAL	17	13	16	0	0	0	7	5

*
1. Principal
2. Teachers
3. System Administrators
4. Accrediting Bodies
5. State Deptment of Education
6. Survey by Outside Agencies
7. Parents
8. Other: School Board; Total student population

+
multiple responses

decision making process for determining grade organization in Vermont's school districts and supervisory unions. Interestingly, only one respondent reported that the local school board was responsible for such a decision while another indicated that the total student population shared in the decision regarding grade organization.

STAFF DEVELOPMENT

An important component of any middle grades program is the quality and commitment of the professional staff. Staff development prior to opening any middle school is one indicator of a district's commitment to the middle school concept.

In the schools reporting, occassional planning sessions of prospective middle school faculty members, inservice meetings of prospective faculty members with consultants on middle level school development, and visitation of schools with similar plans in operation predominate the staff development activities engaged in prior to opening (Table 5). Less than one-third (7) of the twenty-three schools reporting provided a year or more of full-time faculty study and planning in the district.

The same number (7) engaged in no staff development activities related to middle school prior to opening their school. One can only speculate about the degree of commitment of any professional staff that is not provided even rudimentary staff development opportunities prior to redesigning a total school program or grade configuration.

TABLE FIVE +
Staff Development Prior to Opening

ACTIVITIES *	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
TOTAL	7	1	2	5	12	10	12	8

*
1. A year or more of full-time faculty study and planning in your district.
2. A year or more of full-time study by faculty representatives at a university in a program specifically to prepare middle level teachers.
3. Representation in a middle level school planning project specially funded.
4. Summer faculty workshop prior to opening of school year.
5. Occasional planning sessions of prospective middle school faculty members.
6. Visitation of schools with similar plans in operation by representatives of your school.
7. Inservice meetings of prospective faculty members with consultant(s) on middle level school development.
8. Other: none(7); on-the-job training(1).

+
multiple responses

Hopefully, the new middle grades licensure opportunity in Vermont will foster greater awareness of staff development needs for teachers already functioning in middle grades schools throughout the state.

CURRICULUM

Common Subjects

Every school reporting indicated that all students take a core of basic subjects including language arts, Mathematics, Physical Education, science, and social studies. Such is not the case either with required or elective exploratory course offerings or other curricular and extracurricular offerings.

Required and Elective Exploratory Programing

Table Six reports the data regarding required and elective exploratory course offerings in the schools included in the study. Among required exploratory programming art, computers, general music, health, home economics, industrial arts, reading, and sex education predominate. Among elective exploratory offerings band, chorus, foreign language, and orchestra prevail. The data, reported by grade level, suggest that most required exploratory programming is primarily a response to state mandates or local expectations. Hence, the limited offerings in important areas like careers, creative writing, and speech.

Other Curriculum Opportunities

Table Seven reports the other curriculum offerings in schools reporting, including elective activities, mini-

TABLE SIX +
Required/Elective Exploratory Programing

Agriculture	0/0	0/0	0/0	0/0
Art	10/0	15/0	20/3	15/8
Band	0/9	0/15	0/22	0/22
Careers	1/0	3/0	3/0	2/1
Chorus	1/7	0/12	2/16	2/16
Computers	4/0	6/1	10/3	10/3
Creative Writing	3/0	5/0	7/0	7/0
Foreign Language	0/0	2/2	2/13	2/18
General Music	10/0	15/0	12/1	10/2
Health	8/0	15/0	19/0	18/1
Home Economics	5/0	13/0	21/1	16/5
Industrial Arts	4/0	12/0	20/1	17/6
Journalism	0/0	0/1	0/3	0/3
Orchestra	0/5	0/8	0/10	0/10
Reading	8/0	11/0	15/2	15/2
Sex Education	4/1	9/1	10/1	12/1
GRADE	5	6	7	8

TABLE SIX CONTINUED

Speech	0/0	0/0	0/0	0/0
Typing	1/0	1/0	3/0	1/0
GRADE	5	6	7	8

Others: Library, Key Boarding, Great Books, Fine Arts, Substance Abuse

+ Required/Elective (example 5/3)

TABLE SEVEN
Other Elective Activities

Arts & Crafts	3	4	7	6
Honor Society	1	1	4	4
Intramural Sports (Male)	10	15	21	21
Intramural Sports (Female)	10	15	21	21
Interschool Sports (Male)	4	9	21	21
Interschool Sports (Female)	2	7	18	18
Photography	2	2	6	6
Publications	6	10	16	17
School Parties	7	12	14	14
Social Dancing	5	13	21	21
Student Council	9	14	20	20
GRADE	5	6	7	8

Other: Aerospace Club, Art Club, Drama Club, , Geo Bee, Gym Show, Jazz Band, Lettuce Eat Garden Club, Math Counts, Odyssey of the Mind, School & Class Trips, Spelling Club, SADD, Wood Shop.

courses and the like. These data, too, are reported by grade level. Intramural sports for both male and female students and interschool sports for both groups (particularly at grade seven and eight) exist in virtually all schools reporting.

Publications, school parties and social dancing (particularly for grades six, seven and eight), and student council are also important offerings in these schools. Interesting "other" offerings include Aerospace, Art, Drams, and Lettuce Eat Garden Clubs, and SADD.

INSTRUCTION

Respondents provided data in several categories relating to instruction including, instructional plan, criteria employed in assigning students to various types of classrooms (grouping for instruction), instructional schedules, independent study opportunities, and reporting pupil progress.

Instructional Organizatien

Middle grades schools in the study reported grade level and instructional plan(s) for the basic subjects (Table 8). Subjects included language arts, Mathematics, science, and social studies. Instructional plans included interdisciplinary team (two or more teachers working together with same students in two or more of the listed subjects), departmental (different class and teacher for each subject), and self-contained (one teacher for all the basic subjects).

The data present a complex and mixed picture of instructional plans employed by the schools included in the

TABLE EIGHT +
Instructional Organization

Instruction Plan	Interdisciplinary Team	Departmental	Self-Contained Classroom
Language Arts	5th-8th= 5 6th-8th= 1 7th-8th= 3 single grades= 6	5th-8th= 1 6th-8th= 2 7th-8th= 5	5th= 6 6th= 4
Math	5th-6th= 1 5th-8th= 5 6th-8th= 1 7th-8th= 3 single grades= 4	5th-8th= 1 6th-8th= 2 7th-8th= 5	5th= 5 6th= 4
Science	5th=6th= 1 5th=8th= 5 6th=8th= 2 7th-8th= 4 single grades= 4	5th=7th= 1 5th=8th= 1 6th=8th= 2 7th-8th= 5	5th= 5 6th= 4
Social Studies	5th-6th= 1 5th-8th= 5 6th-8th= 2 7th=8th= 3 single grades= 2	5th-8th= 1 6th-8th= 3 7th-8th= 5	5th= 5 6th= 4
Other: Whole school is involved in interdisciplinary teaming; 5 teacher teams for 6th grade; self-contained for basic subjects and interdisciplinary for others; one school in transition to full interdisciplinary.			

+ multiple and complex responses

study. Generally, fifth grades tend to be self contained, while grades 6-8 tend toward either the interdisciplinary or departmental plan or some combination thereof.

Numerous written comments and "exceptions" were offered by respondents. The tenor of these comments suggest that establishing interdisciplinary teams is not only difficult but that such an instructional plan creates scheduling nightmares. Further, the departmental plan of instruction is "cleaner" and easier to schedule. Data reported in Table 10 substantiate this position especially for grades 7 and 8.

Grouping for Instruction

The majority of respondents indicated that homogeneous grouping continues to predominate with efforts to provide heterogeneous grouping opportunities few in number. Data regarding the criteria for grouping, by grade level, and in three categories (home-base advisory, instructional groups in basic subjects, and instructional groups for electives), are reported in Table 9.

Grouping for home-base advisories is usually by random assignment. In the basic subjects schools employ teacher recommendations, age and previous academic record as principal criteria in determining grouping for instruction. Finally, age and random assignment predominate as criteria for assigning students for instruction in elective offerings.

Instructional Schedule

Table 10 reports scheduling practices of the schools included in the study. The majority of schools rely on daily

TABLE NINE +
Grouping for Instruction

Criteria	Home Base Advisory				Instruct. Groups Basic Subjects				Instruct. Groups Electives			
I.Q. Test	0	0	0	0	0	2	3	3	0	0	0	0
Achieve. Test	0	0	0	0	1	6	9	10	0	0	0	0
Teacher Recom.	2	3	2	2	6	11	18	18	1	2	3	4
Age	4	6	6	6	3	7	9	10	2	4	5	5
Previous Academ. Record	1	1	2	2	3	6	13	14	1	1	2	3
Random Assign.	7	12	16	15	5	8	9	9	4	7	9	9
GRADE	5	6	7	8	5	6	7	8	5	6	7	8

+ multiple responses

TABLE TEN +
Scheduling for Instruction

Type of Schedule				
Self-Contained Classroom	5	4	2	2
Daily Periods Uniform in Length	4	11	20	20
Flexible Scheduling Within Blocks for Teams	4	7	7	7
Daily Periods of Varying Length	1	1	2	2
GRADES	5	6	7	8

+ combination responses

periods uniform in length while a few develop flexible scheduling within blocks for instructional teams.

While these data are consistent with those reported in Table 8, it appears that some schools strive to provide interdisciplinary team instruction within a schedule of daily periods of uniform length.

Independent Study

Respondents were asked to indicate by grades, any subject(s) in which opportunities are provided for some students to work independently of a class. Few schools provide opportunities for such independent study. These data are reported in Table 11.

Reporting Pupil Progress

Virtually all schools in the study report pupil progress through letter grades. Many combine this letter scale with other forms including satisfactory-unsatisfactory scale, informal written notes and regularly scheduled parent conferences. In fact three respondents reported that, in their judgment, there were too many parent conferences! The data regarding reporting pupil progress are found in Table 12.

Counseling Students

One of the ingredients critical to middle level education is the firm commitment to supporting the affective needs of early adolescents. Such support begins with knowledgable, competent and caring teachers who are supported by strong counseling services and personnel.

TABLE ELEVEN
Independent Study

TYPE OF INDEPENDENT STUDY				
Some students are released part or all of the time from the class(es) for independent study	5	5	9	9
One or more groups of students with similar interests work as a seminar	2	3	3	3
Some students have individually-planned programs with regularly scheduled time for independent study	2	2	3	3
Some students have time scheduled for work experience with faculty supervision	0	1	3	5
GRADE	5	6	7	8

TABLE TWELVE
Reporting Pupil Progress

SYSTEM*	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
TOTALS	20	5	3	10	15	3	1	14	3

*
1. Letter Scale (A to E, etc.).
2. Word Scale(Excellent, Good, etc.).
3. Number Scale(1-5, etc.).
4. Satisfactory-Unsatisfactory Scale(S, U, Pass-Fail, etc.).
5. Informal Written Notes.
6. Percentage Marks(95, 84, etc.).
7. Dual System(progress compared with class and/or student's own potential.
8. Regularly scheduled parent conferences.
9. Self-evaluation.

Other:(7) progress reports; narratives; predetermined comments on Report Card.

TABLE THIRTEEN +
Personnel Counseling Students

Personnel*	1	2	3	4	5
TOTALS	14	10	6	18	12

*
1. Home Base Teacher (advisor)
2. Other Classroom Teachers
3. Part-Time Counselors
4. Full-Time Counselors

Other: (12) Principal; Assistant Principal; School Nurse; School Psychologist; no response

+
multiple responses

Full-time counselors constitute the majority of personnel engaged in counseling students in the schools reporting. Individuals with home base advisory responsiblity also play a major counseling role in the schools in this study. Finally, in addition to other teachers, building level administrative personnel also play an important role in clunseling students. These and related data are found in Table 13.

SCHOOL EVALUATION

Overall, respondents reported a "favorable" attitude about their schools by key groups including students, staff, parents and public. However, several reported their greatest frustration in seeking to promote better middle grades education was the apparent indifference of staff and parents. Table 14 reports these data.

OTHER DATA

Data were reported by respondents in several other areas important to middle grades education. These areas include home-base or teacher advisory programs, percent of faculty who have specific college or university training for middle level teaching, plans for evaluating the school programs, major problems encountered in establishing the school and final comments, some of which are shared in the final section of this report.

Home-Base/Teacher Advisory

Fourteen schools have a home base or teacher advisory program. In twelve of these all the teachers serve as

TABLE FOURTEEN
School Evaluation

	Estimate of Groups Attitude		
GROUP	Favorable	Indifferent	Opposed
Students	19	2	0
Staff	18	2	1
Parents	19	3	0
Public	13	6	0
Other (School Board)	1	0	0

advisors. Other staff personnel also serve as advisors in these programs inclusing administrators, special education, library staff, teaching assistants, Chapter One staff, school secretaries, and guidance counselors.

Eleven of the programs meet on a daily basis with sessions ranging in length from 10 to 25 minutes.

Faculty Preparation

Respondents were asked to indicate the approximate percent of faculty who have had specific university or college training preparation for middle grades teaching. Thirteen stated that less than 25% of their faculty had such training, while four reported a figure of 25-50% and four others 50-75%. One respondent reported that 75-100% of the faculty had such training. It is interesting to note that the data profile on this school reflected few middle school characteristics.

Plans for Evaluation

Every school in the study has been, is currently or will soon undergo Public School Approval (PSA) review by the state of Vermont. Four schools have recently undergone review by the New England Association of Schools and Colleges (NEASC). One has earned United States Department of Education "Excellence in Education" recognition while a few others reported that various school climate surveys, student achievement scores and the knowledge gained from 35 years in education reflect a positive evaluation of their respective school.

Major Problems

A number of respondents offered feedback on the major problems they enclontered in establishing their middle level school. These are simply listed in Table 15.

TABLE FIFTEEN
Problems Establishing Middle Grades School

-Concern over "lack of academics"
-Teacher apathy
-Personalities that make it difficult to team
-Getting people to know and understand middle school students and programing
-Scheduling time for teaming
-Teacher training
-Changing teachers old habits and attitudes
-Working toward interdisciplinary units
-Grade teams reluctant to implement team activities
-Scheduling interdisciplinary teaming activities
-Lack of staff development
-Staff resistence
-Changing staff attitudes from junior high mentality to middle school mindset
-Providing on-site staff development
-Teacher resistence
-Need to keep community informed of middle level schooling needs
-Scheduling and certification issues
-High school teachers R.I.F'ed to middle school
-Old-time junior high teachers with mental arthritis
-Board and parents want "back-to-basics"
-Middle school "wave" too much without clear thought and direction

SECTION TWO: COMPARISON WITH 1980

The 1989 data is compared with those collected in the 1980 study in the following categories: number of middle grades schools, reasons for establishing middle grades schools, basic curriculum, required/elective exploratory programing, other curriculum opportunities, instructional organization, grouping for instruction, scheduling, and reporting pupil progress.

It should be remembered that the questionnaires used in each study, while different, sought much the same data in similar categories. However, because of differences, a more detailed comparison of results from each study are difficult.

Middle Grades Schools in Vermont

The 1980 study reported the existence of 19 middle grades schools in Vermont while the current study reports 31. This represents an increase of 12 or 61%. In spite of the economic restraints extant in the state this increase reflects not only changes based on increased enrollments and overcrowding but recognition of the importance of providing early adolescents a particular educational experience.

Reasons for Establishing Middle Grades Schools

More than half of the respondents to the 1980 study reported that "providing a better instructional program for children of this age group" was the principal reason for establishing their schools. In the current study the same reason predominated with the "elimination of crowded conditions in other buildings" a close second. In nearly

one-third of the 1989 respondents "remedying the weaknesses of the junior high school" was another important reason for establishing their middle grade schools.

BASIC CURRICULUM

In both studies all respondents indicated that their schools offered a core of basic subjects at all grade levels including language arts, Mathematics, Physical Education, science and social studies.

Required/Elective Exploratory Programing

As in 1980 the state's middle grades schools continue to stress art, general music, health, home economics (Living Arts today), industrial arts (Technology Education today), and reading. There has been a dramatic increase in the use of computers both for teaching and learning. Among elective programing band, chorus, foreign language and orchestra remain available. Unfortunately, the extent of such offerings as careers, creative writing, dramatics, and speech remains quite limited.

Other Elective Opportunities

The type and extent of elective offerings has remained fairly consistent. Intramural sports, interschool sports, school parties, dancing and student council continue to predominate

Instructional Organization and Scheduling

As with the schools in the 1989 study the 1980 data reflect a mixed picture with regard to organization for instruction. While self-contained classrooms remain the norm

for grade five, there has been a marked increase in interdisciplinary teaming for grades six, seven and eight. However, this "improvement" is somewhat tempered by the fact that daily periods of equal length seem to be the predominate scheduling format for schools in both studies.

Reporting Pupil Progress

Generally schools in both studies report pupil progress in the same fashion--with a strong emphasis on letter grade. In the 1989 study schools however thers was also a strong emphasis on "combination" reporting, that is, using a variety of reporting criteria in combination with each other.

Other Concerns

While it appears that specific academic preparation to teach at the middle grades level has not been expanded, either through new undergraduate and graduate teacher preparation programs in the state, organizations like the New England League of Middle Schools (NELMS) and the Vermont Association for Middle Level Education (VAMLE) have had a substantial impact on providing increased staff development opportunities through workshops, inservice and state and regional conferences. By disseminating information about middle level education they also have fostered a broader awareness of the middle school concept, early adolescent development and the conditions essential to a sound educational experience for the age group.

The organizers of the Vermont Association for Middle Level Education and its members can take immense pride in the

organization's impact in Vermont. With some three hundred members, an annual conference, regional, on-site mini-conferences, an annual Journal and up-coming monographs, the organization has kept middle grades education on the "front burner" throughout the state since 1987.

Finally, with the development of a Middle Grades Endorsement, now available (July 1, 1989), institutions of higher education that have teacher education as a part of their mission have no excuse for not developing such programs--at both the undergraduate and graduate level.

One of the major challenges facing middle grades proponents in the 1990's is the need to move beyong the "single building focus" and support the development and improvement of middle grades programing in the myriad elementary schools in Vermont. Coupled with new preparation programs, improved curriculum in the core subjects and improved and expanded exploratory programing, such efforts will substantially improve the chances for a quality education for all early adolescents.

SECTION THREE: AN OVERVIEW OF RESULTS

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The major purpose of this study was to provide, through a detailed analysis of Vermont's middle level schoolprograms, a "data profile" of middle grades education in the state. Such information provides not only a picture of middle level educational practices but may serve as a source of information for changing and improving existing school practice at this level. The following conclusions reflect positive expectations for improving middle grades education for Vermont's thousands of early adolescents.

MIDDLE GRADES EDUCATION IN VERMONT

Conclusion 1

The majority of middle grades students in Vermont are housed in schools that contain either K-6, 7-12, or K-8.

Recommendation 1

Students in grades five through eight ought to be placed in separate buildings for the express purpose of providing early adolescents a specialized educational environment. In the absence of school housing independent of either the elementary or secondary levels, these students ought to be housed in a facility that provides some degree of "separateness" from K-4 and 9-12 students and programs. Early adolescents are developmentally unique and have educational needs somewhat different from elementary and secondary school students. These schools--regardless of name and location (separate building or "school-within-a-school"--

should offer a unique educational program that provides a smooth transition from elementary to secondary school.

Conclusion 2

While most Vermont middle grades schools are not large by usual standards a number of early adolescents are housed in schools with large numbers of students due to the grade configurations that predominate at this level (K-6, 7-12; or, K-8, 9-12).

Recommendation 2

Middle level schools with large enrollments should be reorganized utilizing the "school-within-a-school" concept to provide the type of "personalized" environment essential to sound early adolescent educational, personal and social development. Such a reorganization will go far in assuring that schools will not become too impersonal or operate as mini-high schools.

Conclusion 3

A great variety of articulation strategies are used by middle grades schools to smooth the transition from elementary to middle and from middle to high school.

Recommendation 3

Middle grades schools in Vermont ought to continue to refine articulation procedures for the transition of students from elementary to high school. Continuing dialogue between respective facilties, administrators, parents, and students should make this critical transition experience a positive one.

Conclusion 4

All the middle level schools in the study offer a core of basis subject matter including language arts, Mathematics, Physical Education, science, and social studies.

Recommendation 4

Special emphasis should continue to be placed on the "basic or common" subjects with careful attention to the nature of the instructional processes used in the classroom. Action-oriented instructional techniques, including interdisciplinary teaching/learning, small group interaction, independent study and research, emphasis on skill development and opportunities for guided interaction with the world beyond the classroom should form the foundation of instruction at the middle level.

Conclusion 5

Staff development for teachers in preparation for teaching in the middle grades is limited to occasional planning sessions, school visitation and in-service meetings with middle grades consultants.

Recommendation 5

A more systematic approach to staff development for middle grades teachers ought to be implemented. Simply observing other school programs, attending occasional planning sessions or engaging in "unconnected" in-service with consultants is insufficient preparation for teaching early adolescents.

Conclusion 6

The schools in the study offer a variety of exploratory programing on both a required and elective basis. While Art, band, general music, health, home economics, and industrial arts (Technology Education) abound, few schools offer exploratory opportunities in career education, computers, creative writing, foreign languages journalism, orchestra, and speech.

Recommendation 6

Exploratory course offerings on both a required and elective basis ought to be increased and made more available to lower-grade students (5-6). Such offerings need to be carefully planned and based on the interests and needs of students. High-school-type experiences are inappropriate to this age level. For all middle grades students a greater variety of exploratory options ought to be provided.

Conclusion 7

Intramural and interschool sports for both male and female students exist in most middle level schools in Vermont. Various other extracurricular activities (e.g. publications, school parties, social dancing and student council) are also offered.

Recommendation 7

Other extracurricular opportunities ought to be provided for all middle grades youngsters. Activities that provide opportunities for active and wholesome interaction among early adolescents need to be promoted.

Interschool sports, where extant, must be carefully

controlled and regulated. Middle level schools are not and should not be considered a "training ground" of "farm team" for high school sports programs! A wealth of medical and psychological evidence points to the degree of physical and psychological damage that too often occurs in poorly regulated varsity-type sports programs at this level.

Physical education and intramural programs ought to be available for all middle grades students and take priority over interschool sports. Football should not be a part of any middle level sports program. The potential for life altering injuries is simply too great at this age.

Conclusion 8

Instructional plans for the basic subjects vary in the schools in the study. Most organize instruction along departmentalized lines within daily periods that are uniform in length. However, a number of schools are moving toward more interdisciplinary teaming.

Recommendation 8

Middle grades instruction ought to be organized on a more flexible basis. That is, a reasonable combination of interdisciplinary teaming, departmentalization and self contained classroom experiences ought to guide the instructional plan for middle level students and teachers.

The schedule ought to allow for an instructional plan that smooths the transition from a nurturing, self-contained elementary experience to the more formal departmentalized schedules of secondary schools. Flexibility in scheduling

will provide opportunities for both students and teachers to make instructional decisions that reflect the changing needs of this age group.

Conclusion 9

The majority of middle grades teachers in the schools reporting do not have formal training in middle grades education.

Recommendation 9

Teacher education programs throughout Vermont ought to develop middle grades programs at both the undergraduate and graduate level that lead directly to middle grades licensure. With the advent of middle grades licensure in Vermont (July 1, 1989) there is no excuse for large numbers of educators at this level teaching with little or no formal education in this important area.

The Vermont Association for Middle Level Education offers workshops, conferences and co-sponsored mini-conferences throughout the state for people interested in broadening their knowledge of early adolescence. School districts ought to offer in-service and staff development programs for middle level educators. The Vermont Public School Approval Standards ought to be revised to reflect an awareness of middle level education (5-8).

Conclusion 10

In spite of an "improved profile" among middle grades schools in Vermont serious problems remain. With economic and demographic realities being what they are in the state we

can expect the vast majority of early adolescents to continue being educated in K-6, K-8 and 7-12 school environments. Further, since there are few (though increasing) opportunities for staff development in middle school education the need to "get the word out" remains critical. This situation demands a deeper awareness and understanding of this age group and their specific educational needs. It also demands better and more systematic staff development opportunities for middle grades teachers, administrators, and support staff.

Recommendation 10

It is critically important to remain aware of the essential elements of sound middle grades education (e.g. teachers knowledgeable of early adolescent development, a curriculum based on early adolescent academic and affective needs, a variety of instructional plans and teaching strategies; both required and elective exploratory programing, a comprehensive advising and counseling program, and a positive school climate) (This We Believe, 1982) when developing or revising middle grades programing.

We are reminded that effective middle grades schools, in whatever housing arrangement, work hard to reduce the size of the group to which students belong, are more like elementary schools in climate and tone, than they are like high schools, and, make it possible for students and teachers to spend time together in non-instructional ways (Doda, George, and McEwin, 1987).

In the final analysis, schools that serve the ten to fourteen year old must reflect the best possible educational environment and experience available. In spite of the growing interest in middle school education apathy is always lurking in the background. Simply because a school contains some combination of grades 5-8, a student body of 10-14 year olds and an appropriate name does not guarantee that its educational program is appropriate for early adolescents.

We have all seen and experienced the "educational cycle" where a "new" idea is embrassed only to be dropped for another in a surprisingly short time. And before we know it the idea comes around again, usually in a fifteen to twenty year cycle. The middle school concept as we understand it today has a rather brief history. Unless those committed to providing the conditions important to sound middle school education continue to promote the whole middle school movement may become history.

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Mike taught middle grades social studies in Vermont and California, and in several teacher education programs in Vermont, Maine and North Carolina. He has published articles, reviews and monographs in the fields of middle level education, social studies and special education. His biographical brief on Calvin Coolidge will be published this summer (1990).

Currently, Mike serves as Curriculum Director for Addison-Rutland Supervisory Union, Fair Haven, VT. He is a founding member of the Vermont Association for Middle Level Education where he serves on the Board of Directors and as editor of the VAMLE Journal. He also serves as the Director of Publications for the New England League of Middle Schools with responsibility as editor of the NELMS Journal and monographs.